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Note: Many of these readings, commentaries, and analyses are meant to be more thought-provocative than necessarily rock-solid. Please view the intention of these readings not as knowledge delivery but as thought-provocation.

Version 2

Session 1: Introductions pp. 2

Homework in advance of session 1:

Be prepared to briefly describe a leading that has changed our lives.

Readings: Definition of leadings

CYM Faith & Practice

2.1 – 2.5 The Call to Faithful Living

2.5. Sometimes we will be faithful. We will find the strength to do more than we ever thought we could in obedience to a call. Sometimes we will be unfaithful. We will say “No!” to a clear call, lacking courage, or will not even hear our call. We will stumble. That’s how we learn to say, “Oops! That wasn’t right. I/We made a mistake. Let’s try again.” That’s why we call our process “experiments with truth.” We have to act with the light we have and see what happens. We also need to remember that God is merciful, present with us whether we are faithful or not.

Jan Hoffman, 1998

Quaker Faith & Practice from Britain Yearly Meeting

[29.01](#)

How can we walk with a smile into the dark? We must learn to put our trust in God and the leadings of the Spirit. How many of us are truly led by the Spirit throughout our daily lives? I have turned to God when I have had a difficult decision to make or when I have sought strength to endure the pain in dark times. But I am only slowly learning to dwell in the place where leadings come from. That is a place of love and joy and peace, even in the midst of pain. The more I dwell in that place, the easier it is to smile, because I am no longer afraid.

... We do well to remember that being led by the spirit depends not so much upon God, who is always there to lead us, as upon our willingness to be led. We need to be willing to be led into the dark as well as through green pastures and by still waters. ... The future of this earth need not be in the hands of the world’s ‘leaders’. The world is in God’s hands if we are led by God. Let us be led by the Spirit. Let us walk with a smile into the dark.

Gordon Matthews, 1987

29.02

The ground of our work lies in our waiting on and listening for the Spirit. Let the loving spirit of a loving God call us and lead us. These leadings are both personal and corporate. If they are truly tested in a gathered meeting we shall find that the strength and the courage for obedience are given to us. We need the humility to put obedience before our own wishes.

... we must recognise the Spirit at work in many bodies and in many places, in other churches and faiths, and in secular organisations.

... We are a small church with the pretensions to change the world. But first we have to let God change us – to empower us to be better Friends, and more active in our own work.

A minute from London Yearly Meeting in 1992

29.17

We pray for both the personal and inner strength as well as the corporate strength of a shared calling/struggle that will empower us to face all the trials that we will necessarily encounter. We have no illusions about the fact that to truly live a Christian life in these cataclysmic times means to live a life of great risk.

Minute from Friends World Committee for Consultation, July 1985

Commentary: A word of warning

I want to end with a word of warning, one that we return to in the final session.

We live in an industrial and consumer society, where we are very used to technical thinking, calculating means to ends using physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology. In our industrial society we are far more comfortable with literal, technical, philosophical, and ethical ways of thinking and acting than with religious symbolism. Many have noted the deleterious impact technical thinking has had on the profundity of religious life—I'm thinking of Paul Tillich or Karen Armstrong in particular, but many others. This trend is most obvious in Biblical literalism which, for example, distorts the creation myth into a dubious historical-technical description of events that supposedly happened at a particular time in the past. This literalism destroys the myth's here-and-now relevance: the eternal act of God's creation and its meaning.

But fundamentalism is just an easy and obvious example of the technical mindset applied to religion. The same principle—technical distortion of religious thought—applies to most religions, I think, including Quakers—but usually in far less obvious ways.

My point is: just because we're liberal and not literal Quakers, doesn't mean we are immune to reduction of our own religion to a system of literal thought or even ethics. Far from it. In fact, perhaps Quakerism is one of the worst offenders outside of fundamentalist circles in this sense of literalizing and ethical-izing the myths and symbols we use every day in Quaker life. And I am obviously opening a large can of worms which I obviously have no idea how to close. But maybe that's good.

So I would leave you with this question: would it be interesting and beneficial, at least occasionally, to de-literalize our understanding of leadings? When we experience a leading, does that mean that we are being requested by God, whatever that means, in some literal sense to perform a specific, technically describable act—for instance, to speak a particular word of truth, to go to jail for a cause, to order a mushroom pizza? Does it mean that if we say “yes” to God we're being good, and if we say “no” to our leadings that we're being bad little Quakers? That's what I mean by “the ethical-izing of our faith”—that so to speak God becomes the ethical dictator, the foreman, the judge, the engineer, and we strive to be obedient unskilled workers in the Divine factory, despite the increasingly frenzied pace of production and despite our demanding Boss. Or is it possible that the importance of some leadings—granted, not all leadings—has nothing in the slightest to do with whether we perform the “requested” act. What if that sense of God requesting us—nay commanding us—to act in a particular way symbolizes something else entirely? What if, in viewing leadings as being only and always about the “requested action”, we're missing the point, and that the leading itself symbolizes something larger and more fundamental?

For me, this question is the central theme of this course: how are we to understand leadings within technical society? I personally am curious what a de-literalized understanding of leadings could mean practically and theoretically, and if there is much benefit.

The Questions that Guide this Course

- How have Quakers understood leadings differently over time and how does that enrich my understanding today?
 - What are the Christian roots of this doctrine of leadings and how does knowing these roots enrich even non-Christian and non-theist lives today?
 - How can we know a true leading from a false one
 - Is there such a thing as a false leading?

- What if someone claims that a leading told them to go against traditional Testimonies such as taking up arms (like Nixon) or communal discernment?
- Isn't it a little weird to think that God "talks to us"?
- What's the benefit of "theologizing" about leadings? What do we gain and what do we gain by *not* talking about them?
 - Quakers have long been relatively anti-theological—in other words, we resist systematic definitions of our core concepts, and we especially resist the need to agree on them. And there are advantages to this.
 - We insist on experience and diversity within us.
 - We point out that a systematic definition never does justice to the underlying experience, and is constantly changing
 - We fear the internal strife of needing to agree on these kinds of definitions
 - Yet, are we being honest? Insisting on experience *is* a theology.
 - Our community is based on an agreement not to try to agree on certain concepts.
 - Yet our community often has unspoken agreements as well about core concepts, and this is not as honest as it could be and difficult to detect for newcomers and outsiders.
 - We also benefit relatively little from the dialog and sharing, which has the potential to enrich us as well, despite the risk for destructive conflict.
 - Our symbols and concepts remain relatively superficial and underdeveloped in our understanding of them
 - Some might say we struggle to explain our faith to newcomers and our children

Session 2: Early Friends: Theology in the Age of Guilt pp. 7

Homework in advance of Session 2:

Come with a leading-win and a leading-fail (can be a temporary fail) from this week (ideally from the week, but over the lifetime is fine). In other words, first, think of one time when we detected a leading and followed it. Second, think of a time when we detected a leading (perhaps retroactively) and did something else, at least temporarily.

Note 1: the goal is to focus our attention this week on the moving of Spirit in our lives *and* our freedom relative to those leadings. Note 2: I intend the phrase “leading-fail” to be melodramatic and silly.

Brief discussion: how does it impact us to hear these stories?

Commentary: On Early Friends

Before discussing early Friends, I feel compelled to make a few remarks just to give what is, in my view, essential to understanding what leadings meant within the theology of Early Quakers.

Please have courage. At first, some of this may (or may not) seem a bit harsh upon people I have quite a bit of admiration for. And for non-Christian, non-theist Quakers, the immediate relevance of some of this may escape you. Please have patience—I have you in mind throughout, though it occasionally won't seem so.

The Quaker movement in the mid-1600s wasn't particularly new in a lot of ways. For example, Joachim de Fiore, a 12th century abbot in southern Italy, believed that there were three stages in history: the stage of the Father in the Old Testament, the stage of the Son (Church history), and the coming of a third stage of the Divine Spirit. He taught that in that third age, beginning in 1260 A.D., there would be no more church, since everyone would be taught directly by the Spirit (as promised in the New Testament, especially the Book of Revelation). In this stage, he believed there would be equality, since a new reign of peace and concord would make hierarchy and the Roman church unnecessary. These half-realistic, half-fantastic ideas had a huge influence over the course of Christian history, particularly in the more radical parts of the Reformation, of which the Quakers are perhaps the most vibrant surviving example. But even more so, these ideas had massive influence on the later secular Enlightenment.

In any case, as Ben Pink Dandelion pointed out in the Quaker study in Kemptville, Ontario in 2013, Quakerism began as a millennial sect. Millennial refers to the fact that Quakers were

predicting the arrival of the millennium of Christ in a literal, non-mythical way, similar to de Fiore. They viewed Christ's coming not as symbolism but as an event that is at hand or coming someday in the future. Recall the way the fundamentalists literalized the creation myth into something that happened in the past, rather than a universal symbol of continuous creation. In the same way here, the myth of the millennium of Christ lost its universal, continuous quality as a symbol. Early Quakers and many others literalized this mythical, symbolic imagery into an immanent event.

Note that in the mid-1600s early experiments that resemble science had already begun. It is no coincidence at all that just as science, technological advancement, and colonial capitalism (the basis of technical society) began, we saw a frequent literalized understanding of the millennium of Christ in many religious and later secular movements, not just the Quakers. Much early modern "scientific" activity aimed to scientifically predict the Second Coming (e.g. Isaac Newton's lesser known work).

In any case, embarrassing as it might be, Quakers began with the semi-fantastic claim that this Christian "end-time" was nigh—indeed, that the end-time had already arrived. They expected everything promised in the Bible relating to the end-times to come to pass: a third era of peace and equality, where God speaks to all through all, where the churches and religions—and their myths and symbols—become unnecessary, where the power of God rules over human power. Early Quakers, believing that their movement represented the end of religion, claimed that theology would no longer be necessary. This has led to an anti-theological stance ever since.

Like every millennial movement, there is much noble creativity and courage and also absurdity and inevitable disappointment.

Granted, all this may seem terribly outmoded and even irrelevant to our day. Except that I don't think we can fully understand and live the leadings that come to us today without understanding the millennial roots of Quakerism. We need these millennial roots to understand what leadings meant then and even in some ways what leadings mean to us now.

(These are the same millennial roots as those of the Enlightenment by the way, so this discussion on Quakerism is actually crucial to understanding modernity and the prominent institutions and economy around us today. It's a long story, but in a sentence, the Enlightenment had similar millennial roots in the sense that the Enlightenment promised that Freedom and Progress would bring about capital-R Reason (the Reason of the end-times as described in the Book of Revelations, where human reason is united with Truth, Beauty, Justice, and Love), making religion obsolete among other things. Cf. all utopian forms of anarchism, faith in

technology, the rationally planned economy (communism), capitalism (free markets), libertarianism—even the utopian forms of liberalism, social democracy, and liberal-democracy—depend on the millennial assumption. Like I said, it’s a long story but my point is that Quaker theology is strikingly similar to the “theology” of our modern society. Learning about ourselves also illuminates the society around us).

As we shall explore further in the final session, the problem with the literalized millennial theology of Early Friends is neither theology nor millennialism. The problem is the literal understanding of this myth, as if it were a technical description. Therefore the solution to a literal millennialism (and a literal understanding of leadings), even for us Quakers—even non-theist Quakers to some degree—is to regain the depth of the myth, its symbolism that applies to every moment. The optimistic assumption that we can all be taught directly by Spirit, through leadings, in every moment is a key part of these millennial expectations. If we reevaluate millennialism in Quaker thought by removing literalism then we also must reevaluate the way we often think about leadings. We’ll return to this in the final course. The point for now is that the two—leadings on the one hand and our stance on millennial expectations on the other—go hand in hand.

One final thought: Early Friends arose in an age of profound anxiety—deeply concerned with the proper way to act in a rapidly changing world. The doctrine of “leadings” that we’re looking at in this course arose as a powerful response to the anxiety of that era. This explains part of Quakerism’s explosive initial popularity and lasting power.

So with these considerations in mind, let us turn to the Early Friends.

Readings: Early Friends on Leadings

Mind the light of God in your consciences,
 which will show you all deceit;
 dwelling in it, guides out of the many things into one spirit,
 which cannot lie, nor deceive.
 Those who are guided by it, are one.
 George Fox, 1624-1691

The old man worships a God at a distance, but knows Him not, nor where He is, but by relation from others, either by word or writing... The new man worships a God at hand, where He dwells in His holy temple, and he knows Him by His own Word from His dwelling-place, and not by relation of others.
 James Nayler, 1616-1660

The want of faith in the word and power of God within, and the neglect of hearing the still, small voice thereof, is the ground and cause of all ignorance, errors, darkness, and confusion among men, of all sects and sorts of religion upon the face of the whole earth.

William Shewen, 1631-1695

Look not out, but within... Remember it is a still voice that speaks to us in this day, and that it is not to be heard in the noises and hurries of the mind; but it is distinctly understood in a retired frame.

William Penn, 1644-1718

This most certain doctrine being then received, that there is an evangelical and saving Light and grace in all, the universality of the love and mercy of God towards mankind, both in the death of his beloved Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the manifestation of the Light in the heart, is established and confirmed, against all the objections of such as deny it.

The Spirit is that Guide by which the Saints are led into all Truth.

Robert Barclay

And whereas it is said, I permit not a Woman to speak, as saith the Law: But where Women are led by the Spirit of God, they are not under the Law; for Christ in the Male and in the Female is one; and where he is made manifest in Male and Female, he may speak; for he is the end of the Law for Righteousness to all them that believe. So here you ought to make a Distinction what sort of Women are forbidden to speak; such as were under the Law, who were not come to Christ, nor to the Spirit of Prophecy.

Margaret Fell

Ben Pink Dandelion's [Quaker study](#) from Kemptville, ON in 2013 is worth watching. At least [Part 1](#). But [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#), and [Part 5](#) are well worth it.

Closing thought

Please have courage, Friends. I hope no one will despair at our Early Quakers. True that much of Quaker theology—including leadings—depends on the attitude that the end-times are already here (as does modern secularism). Throwing that assumption into question does have profound and troubling implications for any literal understanding of leadings, even today, as we shall see. If the end-times are not at hand then God is not all to all. Early Quakers hoped that their movement was a sign of the end of religion, tradition, and power. Early Quakers assumed that if we dropped external distractions, which took us away from the Inner Teacher, that we then had access to the that power that ended and fulfilled history. The Quaker doctrine was (and implicitly still is, at least in part) that when we turn inward we can do without tradition and power. The

assumption was that leadings are always available to all of us, especially those willing to do away with external distractions.

But this seems optimistic at best, naïve and utopian at worst. Leadings are not always available; God is not all to all; we live in the meantime, “awaiting” the end-time. Therefore, Quakers have often been naïve and silent about our real theology, the real sociological power structures (present in every social group) among us in our business meetings, the real fact of our traditions, the real basis for our decisions (e.g. leadings, traditions, and self-interests). We have become yet another religion. Power and tradition are facts among us so long as Spirit is not fully present. Spirit is certainly *partially* present in every moment, but nonetheless, the Spirit is not *fully* present in our lives most of the time (if ever). I believe that this critical look will bring us, even the non-Christian, non-theists among us, to a deeper understanding of what our leadings mean to us today. Even if this deeper understanding isn’t apparent yet, I believe it will be by the end of the course.

Sometimes we must brave the criticism of something treasured for something even more precious to come to light. Still, today’s course has been largely negative in the sense that it focused on denying the (I think superstitious) optimism at the core of Early Quakerism (and also at the core of the Enlightenment faith in Reason). We could say that the hope of Early Friends was to build a way of life upon leadings alone. They hoped to find the power of the end-times within themselves by removing distractions, through moral Purification. But I think the subsequent events of history—e.g. slavery, two World Wars, Nixon’s presidency etc.—have shown that the end-times are certainly not here. Turning inward is not sufficient to attain Christhood, as early Quakers claimed they had. Removing distractions, an inward turn, though beneficial, is not enough to bring the end-times into our lives and world. In my experience, leadings are not uncommon but I also cannot base my life upon them. But to the extent that the end-times are *not* at hand, what does this mean?

Indeed, this millenarian analysis forces us to revisit traditional Quaker testimonies such as peace, integrity, and equality, and our relationship to symbol and ritual, in ways that may appear quite risky: for instance, viewing leadings as a symbol might lead to an otherworldly passivity or a wholesale abandonment of the Peace Testimony. I can give examples of this kind of revisiting (for instance, Steve Smith’s revisiting of the peace testimony in *Living Virtue, Declaring against War*) that I think will be comforting. But in any case, I can understand quite a bit of fear. For the moment, all that can be done say that I believe things will look brighter by the end.

Session 3: Quakers after Freud: emotional and physical signs of leadings pp. 13

Homework in advance of Session 3

So far we've talked about leading-wins and leading-fails. This week, the homework is to think about leading-gaps—a time when that “still, small voice” is so still and so small that it's inaudible. Unlike the course title, this is “Uh oh, I don't hear a leading.” Since so much of the millenarian thesis, so to speak, is that Spirit is already present to all (and I'm saying that's not true, cf. consumerism), how does Spirit's *absence* impact our day-to-day lives? The homework is to seek a leading for every decision, even the most tiny, until a leading does not come.

Perhaps try this a few times. What I'm interested in is our reaction to the lack of a leading. What feelings and thoughts come up? What options do we have? What is the best we can do in this situation? Quakerism seemingly calls for us to follow a leading for *every* decision in our lives, no matter how small, and where a leading-gap arises, to sit in expectant waiting and discernment—but isn't that unrealistic? What happens when we let go of trying to live entirely from leadings (and this is almost (if not completely) inevitable) and use other ways to arrive at decisions? Or do you find that leadings are equally available in every moment?

This “homework” may prove painful. So, essential to this assignment are both a whole lot of letting go and also the intention to be gentle with ourselves. Be ready to give one example about the choices we face when we live a “leading-gap.”

Commentary:

Even Barclay identifies the source of revelation “whether by outward voices and appearances, Dreams, or inward objective manifestations in the heart.” So Freud was not revealing something entirely new to Quakers. Yet Freud and the psychological revolution he began shaped (which I will simply refer to as “Freud,” symbolically meaning the entire psychological revolution as it impacted society) the 20th century and influenced Quakers' understanding of ourselves.

Freud brought about a renewed interest in religion through the lens of unconscious drives, symbols and taboo, and the relationship between body, emotions, and mind. In some ways, by discovering the unconscious, psychology liberated religion from rationalism. By rationalism, I mean the view of human nature that we are and should be a properly functioning calculator of self-interest, that we can and should operate according to logical and mathematical reasoning. This can be called a mechanical understanding of human nature in the sense that “evidence

goes in, rational conclusion goes out.” For instance, those who believe humans are rational machines will try to persuade others using pure evidence and logical precision, or appeals to self-interest. It almost goes without saying that there is little room for organized religion in such a narrow view of human nature—there is certainly little place for symbol, myth, taboo, the substance of religion. (As mentioned elsewhere, this technical rationalism, the notion that we should live exclusively according to calculating reason, is based on a similar end-times theology as the Early Quakers.) Freud and those who followed him demolished this simplistic rationalist theory of human behaviour, which had been quite strong in some form or another since the time of the Quakers. Even the Early Quaker vision of human nature is simple and naïvely optimistic in very similar ways. Freud and those who followed him demolished all of that, reopening a space in human experience for symbol and myth. This also posed a question to Quakers: considering the existence of the unconscious, how can we continue to justify our lack of symbol, ornament, and ritual?

Freud and those who followed him brought a renewed focus on the unconscious mind and the “ego,” the role of self-interest, habit, trauma, childhood, and other factors on the personality. This opened up new avenues of self-reflection for some Quakers, in many ways giving a new language to think more precisely about the cognitive-physiological processes that are part of our experience of leadings or the lack of a leading. Freud and those who followed him also helped Quakers name psychological processes that “compete” with leadings, such as “acting out of ‘ego’ rather than a leading.”

In any case, some friends, especially non-theist Friends, discuss the psychosomatic (mind and body) signs of a leading: Does your knee twitch? Do you repeat the same thought? Does a thought come followed by one that says “say this!” Do you feel the warm feelings of love or a rising righteous anger? Freud helped many Quakers understand our normal psychological processes so that we could determine when a leading seems to arrive from outside these processes, indeed, from outside ourselves. The influence of psychology on Quakerism cannot be undone.

In any case, there’s another side to the story. Psychology also can continue the literalizing trend we’ve been following here. Once again, a religious symbol is transformed into a scientific phenomenon, as if leadings can be reduced to psychological stimuli: thoughts, emotions, and somatics (bodily sensation). It is possible to reduce leadings to a predictable sign, or a constant constellation of signs, or a sense that the leading comes from outside our thoughts, rather than from certain kinds of thoughts. In reality, leadings are always different, and it is not one sign in

particular but their constellation that is decisive. In other words, it is a constellation of emotion, a thought, a bodily sensation simultaneously—in some constellation—that, together in unity, we are able to recognize as a leading.

Here we see the greatest danger of profanizing leadings, by finding mechanical and predictable signs of being led. For just this reason, it can be almost taboo to discuss leadings as a psychological phenomenon. They are psychological phenomena. But they are not *just* psychological phenomena.

Psychology has also influenced Quakers to link time to leadings. In other words, one sign of a leading is the repetition of psychosomatic signs over a period of time. For instance, having the same thought over and over in a period of time means that the thought is a leading, and should be spoken as ministry. But this also risks making an idol out of hesitation, restraint, and WASPy self-repression. I'm not saying circumspection is a bad thing but neither should we say that God must be known through it. Hesitation can be very appropriate, of course, but this begs the question: are we led to hesitate? Are we Quakers plagued by an inability to make swift decisions when necessary? If so, perhaps it is because we make an idol out of the repetition of cognitive-physiological signs over a period of time. Of course, sometimes we are led to hesitate, but that truth does not remove the danger.

Finally, a question: what does a leading do for us psychologically? How do we feel and what do we think when we believe we know how we are led? How does this feel relative to secular ways of doing and thinking, or uncertainty?

Quotations:

How do you “test” whether we are led to speak?

I have very physical cues — heart pounding, stomach full of butterflies.... I can't *not* speak. I review what I have heard several times, and eventually my legs lift me up, I breathe and I speak.

Sue Tannehill Buffalo, NY

Nothing is hard and fast in my experience.

Olivia

I agree about the physical manifestations, though sometimes I have just known that I am being Led to speak/sing/whatever without these signs. Sometimes I am very aware that I'm supposed to start giving a message but I won't know how it's going to end.

Becky Ray

I believe that a lot of times Friends find themselves suddenly speaking without realizing they are doing so. In such a case, that usually means the Friend has been quaking for awhile and resisted the call to speak. God finally takes over.

Paula Deming

A true message makes me tremble. It starts in my fingers and spreads through my body. It might be a message that I have no clue as to why I'm saying it, or something I have contemplated. An elder once told me a true message would not have "I" or "me" or "my" in it. That makes sense. Ego would want to share a story about oneself. The Lord will use you as a messenger to speak His message.

I do not speak often as it takes courage for me to stand, and I cannot always do this.

Caroline Gulian

The need to discern something is set in action by God. It is of no use for me to try to "discern" if God wants me to go to Chicago. It is my experience that lists of pros and cons, prayerful petitions and other earthly strivings will not usually offer much in the way of Truth. God may or may not have an opinion on anything that I initiate. It only becomes imperative to try to discern God's will when we have an experience, some powerful experience, that we cannot explain, an experience through which we suspect (or fear) God may be trying to communicate with us. This communication can come in a strong feeling that won't go away, a dream, a voice, a sense of certainty. ...

Openings can be thought of as an instantaneous recognition of some important piece of God's plan. An example of an opening for me was prior to my conviction, when I suddenly became aware there was someplace I was supposed to be Sunday mornings. I also became obsessed with a particular style of bonnet, tracked it down on the Internet, purchased it, and placed it (safely) in the closet. I was not a Christian and did not admire Christians. I tried at first to satisfy this inexplicable feeling by attending services at a Unitarian Universalist congregation (decidedly not Christian). But as soon as everyone stood up the first time, I found myself leaving the room. Over and over again, at the first standing up of a very stand-up and sit-down service, I would find myself leaving the room.

...

For me, after the opening for me that there was someplace I was supposed to be (but not at the Unitarian Universalist services), Sunday mornings became a torture. I felt I was being ground down, filled with an urgent, intense requirement I could not fulfill. Quakers describe "bearing a burden." At some point, speaking generally, the burden may grow to a specific leading, where a person feels led to act in a specific way. In my case, I tried all kinds of things to alleviate my suffering, finally submitting to the idea that it just might be a Christian church I was supposed to attend.

I would get in the car and drive to different churches, but I could never get out of the car, and instead would drive around and around, circling church buildings, longing for something, searching. The one time I did get out of the car, the church was on retreat and not holding services that Sunday. It wasn't right, none of them were right, and I couldn't pretend otherwise. I knew what wasn't right, and I knew the only "answer" to my "problem" was some unknown one right thing that was "out there" for me, but I grew more and more desperate to learn what it was. Finally, one Sunday morning, I gave up all human striving and, in anger and despair, and in fact much fury, told God that if he had something to say, to just say, or (my big threat) I was going to just sit there. Peace settled over me, and I picked up a book and opened to a page on Quakers, and suddenly knew my path: I was supposed to be a plain Quaker. The importance of the bonnet in the closet became clear. I now had a specific leading: to become a plain Quaker. In that moment, I was made a Christian and called to live as a plain Quaker, though I knew nothing about living as a Christian and did not even know if there were any plain Quakers in the world, having never heard of Conservative Friends. It didn't matter. I knew what I was to do, whether it made sense or not, whether I knew all the ins and outs or not.

So the pattern I have observed in my own experiences of God as a Traditional Quaker and a Friend of the Truth has been that I have an opening to some Truth, an awareness triggered by some transcendent or otherwise inexplicable experience, which leads to bearing a burden where I am being prepared to act on a concern, and then finally a specific leading, where I am led to a specific action. By the time I learn what the specific action is, I have been so ground down, so "made tender" by God's pressure to let go of my own fears and to trust his guidance, that I generally am relieved to learn my fate, if not entirely prepared to leap forward. Keep in mind that though someone may arrive at a specific leading, and may feel completely clear about it, there is no guarantee that person will act upon the leading properly or that this person may not be led astray. It is for this reason that we have to engage in the next step: a discernment process.

Patience is a key component of the discernment process. We need to be able to wait and hold the leading in our hearts for some duration. A desire to instantaneously jump in is normal but not necessarily a sign of a true leading. Waiting to see how things proceed and to be clear that the leading has strength and endurance help the discerner achieve real clarity and faith that their leading is True.

Quaker Jane

If God is trying to tell you something... it probably will manifest as 'your' thinking—because that's the process you have available for 'seeing' the truth of a thought.

If you examine any example of automatic writing, 'channelling', etc., it quickly becomes obvious that the content is somebody's human notions, expressed without that person wishing to take responsibility for them.

...

There's a good pamphlet called 'The Quaking Meeting' available from Australia Yearly Meeting. The author points out that quaking is a pretty natural reaction to a lot of 'energy' passing through one's body. And sometimes, when she has that experience, people have approached her with considerable worry: 'What's wrong with her? Should we call a doctor?' But quaking was never considered (even by early Friends) to be a necessary nor sufficient condition for a true message.

A message may (or may not be) 'about you.'

There is no specific "test" that might be applied without making that test itself a form of idolatry. ... But there is this feeling of "I need to say this," which rightly or not, makes the issue moot.

Forrest Curo, San Diego Meeting

Sometimes a message may stay with you for a while until it becomes clear that you are to share it.

Mary Linda

I feel for a visceral sense that the message demands to be spoken. After speaking (if true), I come into a deep sense of peace and work accomplished. I've also had the experience of messages I've not spoken, followed by a sense of a moment missed, regret.

Judy Goldberger, Beacon Hill Friends Meeting & Jamaica Plain Worship Group

Each time I am led to speak is different. Sometimes it is with trembling, or "quaking." At others it is a simple confidence that I have ministry. The word ministry for me means that I am not speaking to receive personal recognition, but that I am seeking to give to others from the Light have seen.

Anonymous, Northside Friends Meeting Chicago ILYM

Getting those butterflies... the rush of heat... agitation; quaking, you might call it. That's usually how it feels when it's right. And I usually "test" by trying to center back down, away from the thoughts I think might be ministry; if they come back, that's a good sign too. Makes sense... if I still have them when I'm centered, it's more likely they're coming from the Center. So, I'll wait awhile after I have the first impulse, to test it. Also, if I have to word-smith it too much, or explain it to myself or argue about it in my head, that's a bad sign; that's me wrapped up in my thinking. Sometimes, I've waited too long, though, and realized afterwards that I ought to have spoken. It takes courage.

Frederick Martin; Monadnock Meeting, New England

Closing:

I met a Quaker once who stood up and spoke every time her heart quickened. And most of us believed what she said was rarely a leading—her words frequently struck us as nonsensical. So there is a risk that leadings lose their mystery and depth if we attempt a cognitive-physiological analysis. The problem is not just that every leading is unique. That's true, but it's more than that. (If every leading were utterly different then there would be no pattern that allowed us to recognize it as a leading.) But leadings are ineffable, beyond words. But even more, it's perhaps the constellation of factors—mental, physiological, and emotional—that identifies a leading, not anything alone. In other words, I'm suggesting it may be the entire package of factors as recognized by a whole, complex individual—the conscious and unconscious mind, the emotions, and the body at once, though in different combinations—that makes a leading.

Session 4: Leadings vs. tradition pp. 21

Homework in advance of session 4:

How do leadings manifest themselves psychologically? If we were forced to look *only* at emotional, mental, and physical responses for signs of leadings, what do we see and would we be missing? If leadings are always different then how do we recognize it as a leading? Is this exercise unpleasant, and if so, why?

Quotation

“But with and by this divine power and spirit of God, and the light of Jesus, I was to bring people off from all their own ways, to Christ the new and living way; from their churches, which men had made and gathered, to the church in God, the general assembly written in heaven, which Christ is the head of; and off from the world's teachers made by men, to learn of Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, of whom the Father said, 'This is my beloved son, listen to him;’ and off from all the world's worships, to know the spirit of truth in the inward parts, and to be led thereby, that in it they might worship the Father of spirits, who seeks such to worship him; those who do not worship in his spirit do not know what they worship.

“I was to bring people off from all the world's religions, which are in vain; that they might know the pure religion... I was to bring them off from all the world's fellowships, prayers, and songs, which stood in forms without power, that their fellowship might be in the holy spirit, the eternal spirit of God; that they might pray in the holy spirit, sing in the spirit, and with the grace that comes by Jesus... I was to bring people off from Jewish ceremonies, from heathenish fables, from men's inventions and windy doctrines, by which they blew the people about, this way and the other way, from sect to sect; and from all their poor underpinnings, with their schools and colleges for making ministers of Christ, who are indeed ministers of their own making, but not of Christ's; and from all their images, crosses, and sprinkling of infants, with all their holy days, (so called), and all their vain traditions, which they had got up since the apostles' days, which the Lord's power was against. In the dread and authority of that was I moved to declare against them all, and against all who preached and not freely, as being such who had not received freely from Christ.”

--George Fox's Journal

Quasi-manifesto: Reaffirming our tradition

Moving questions: *Do we have a healthy relationship to our traditions? What are the traditions that we enact today (a.k.a. how Catholic are we)? What about the old debate of too traditional vs. not enough—not speaking to the younger generation, stuck in our ways vs. celebrating the richness of our heritage? Do we face some analogous struggles in keeping our tradition alive as many other traditions (Christian, indigenous, regional/rural)?*

Early Quakers believed that the end-times, arriving through a Puritanical “inward turn,” meant the end of tradition. Leadings of the Spirit would govern humankind in every particular; the power and necessity of traditions would be broken. Once again here, we see a literal understanding of the end-times as present—in this case, a literal belief that traditions are no longer necessary and can be abolished. The (mistaken) assumption here is that leadings are ever-present so long as we ignore human creations, such as culture, and turn inward. This is why Early Friends had such a negative, Puritanical view of dancing, painting, and other arts. In a word, they had an *abolitionist* attitude about cultural traditions. In the living Christ, tradition was obsolete.

We see right away the absurd consequences that follow from this literalism: founding a Quaker tradition on the abolishment of tradition. In principle, this would be self-annihilation.

But the fact that Quakers exist today shows that we have compromised this principle somewhere—and that we are shrewd to avoid its consequences. But in this compromise comes the possibility of self-deception and with self-deception can come hubris. Early Quakers were lacking in integrity on this point and I suspect we still are. Self-deception may be universal, but is it not particularly likely with any religion that begins by claiming it is the end of religion? Perhaps, or perhaps not. But either way, despite the Early Quaker abolition of Catholic elements such as the priesthood, this anti-traditional principle has never been humbly or rigorously applied. I suspect this is the root cause of Quaker’s indifference to theology: that if we thought too carefully about the consequences of our theology, we would abolish our own tradition. But that, as we shall see, is what it would mean to live “from leadings alone.” Either we do nothing until we get a *true and pure* leading (which in my experience don’t come all that often, if ever). This means ceasing nearly all action—awaiting our leadings in much silent expectation. Or if we really believe Quakerism is the end of tradition then our other option is to scatter, and cease to exist. I would like to suggest that those—inaction or disbanding—are the logical consequences

of liberal Quaker theology, if we were foolish enough to actually apply it rigorously. But let us look at all of this more closely.

Defining Tradition

Genuine traditions are rare in modern times so let us begin this discussion with an example, and a bit of a silly one: traditional Italian cuisine. A traditional cuisine, such as Italian cooking, is resistant to change. There are “rules” about how to make a traditional spaghetti and with what ingredients. Of course, other recipes and variations are proposed all the time. There is no actual reason why one couldn’t add curry powder to tomato sauce with spaghetti. But these modifications rarely become “traditional,” even when they’re quite tasty. The measure of what is and what becomes “traditional” is not purely based on practical or measurable criteria; it is not a competition.

Traditions are conservative but they are not totally closed to change. After all, Italians had never seen a tomato before 1492. Nor are traditions entirely rational or anthropologically well-defined: in an anthropological sense, there is no one “Italian” cuisine, since Italy is made up of many competing subcultures, and each of those subcultures are made up of other subcultures. Moreover, every individual and every generation brings slight modifications to every living tradition. But subjectively speaking, we view kinds of cooking to be “the” true Italian tradition, which admits of no modification. Even if traditions are not developed through strict criteria but rather through a sort of collective intuition, traditions are nonetheless quite influential. They were much more powerful before modernity began. Quakerism is part of a movement that shook the power of traditions in our society.

Wikipedia summarizes tradition as a belief or behaviour passed down within a group with *symbolic meaning or special significance*. So traditions are not only a literal transmission of information, they usually have some symbolic power and importance. Traditions do not consist only of technical information, such as how to build a sturdy bridge out of lumber. In other words, a tradition, in the sense I’m using the word, gives meaning, special significance, to human lives. Often strong associations come with tradition, such as the warmth of family we might associate with a spaghetti dinner made by mom. This special significance is not necessarily based on personal experience—they can be communicated through stories or books to people who have never even tasted spaghetti.

Traditions transmit more than purely practical or ethical beliefs, though there are those too. Throughout our lives we are conditioned through our culture to *respond* to certain traditions: symbols, myths, and rituals. If we’ve been conditioned to associate the warm love of family with

a spaghetti dinner, then eating spaghetti the traditional way can be a source of comfort for us. Traditions gain the power to move us through cultural conditioning. As we grow older, we can (to some extent) freely choose to be conditioned by certain symbols as well. For instance, everyone taking this course is *choosing* to deepen their knowledge and resonance with the symbol of a leading. It is noble and a sign of humility to seek to uncover new layers of meaning for the symbols and traditions that animate our lives. To find the depth of a tradition, its deepest level of meaning, is a lifelong process. All living symbols, all living traditions, have an inexhaustible depth of meaning.

Traditions harken back to key ancestors—quasi-saints—as a source of inspiration today. George Fox or Jesus or Buddha or George Washington—the founders of a tradition, be it religious or national, are inevitably treated as quasi-saints or saints.

Because of the quasi-sainthood of the tradition's founder, the hallmark of a genuine tradition is the sense that it *must* remain unchanged, at least in principle. Think of religious traditions or national traditions—the rites of Christianity, the rituals of armies and navies are all slow to change. Jesus himself taught Christians certain prayers and acts to commemorate him. Traditional cuisines, as already mentioned, are fairly resistant to change. Traditions must only rarely be altered by normal mortals.

This stands in contrast to technology: whenever a new technology is superior to an old technology, as measured by its purpose, the old technology is discarded. But unlike technology, because it takes a lifetime to uncover the deeper meaning of a tradition it is often seen as risking hubris or ignorance to hastily malign or discard a tradition. To discard Italian cooking for a hasty reason, such as one burned pot of pasta, can be seen as unwise or shallow. Besides, traditional cuisines are about so much more than how they taste! They can be about family, comfort, and values.

Traditions claim to be unchanging, harkening back to a saintly ancestor. But in reality, of course, from an anthropological perspective, traditions do change. Every generation and every individual bring at least minor changes to every living tradition. So the real hallmark of a tradition is not that it actually *is* unchanged, but that it *claims* to be unchanging. Put another way, what's important about tradition is not that the form remains unchanged over time (it changes, if perhaps slowly) but that the tradition expresses our ancestor's true, precious, timeless, and wise *intention* for our lives. Proponents of a tradition almost invariably claim it would take multiple lifetimes to discover the richness and depth of this ancestor's "true intention for our lives," which is the true meaning of a tradition. Even if the outer form changes, even if the substance of a

tradition is altered, the *intention* of a tradition remains the same: something precious to be conserved and revered. There are many Christian and Buddhist traditions, for instance, and all are radically different from each other and the original form and constantly changing. But they all claim to be the truest intention of Jesus or the Buddha for our day.

Leadings, experience, and science

Leadings are most akin to scientific-rational thinking, not tradition-based thinking. This is because both scientific understanding and leadings are in principle open to “New Light.” Leadings and science can always change. The source of a leading is God in the moment of the Leading. The source of a scientific conclusion is based on reason and controlled experiments, not what the ancestors have done in the past. Whereas tradition is closed to innovation, science and leadings are wide open to it.

Although every tradition began as a leading, leadings and tradition can be antithetical in some ways. Even if tradition provides a structure and a content for leadings, both spring from different sources and obey different authorities. When we make spaghetti the traditional way, we respect the wisdom and authority of certain ancestors or we evoke comforting associations; on the other hand, when we add curry powder because we think it tastes better or because a scientist recommends it for our health, or simply because we are so led, the *authority* has changed from an ancestor to our inner compass or rational capacity or God.

In the same way, tradition and experience can stand in tension. We Quakers say we are a religion of experience. But that is not true, at least not literally true, because a tradition cannot be based entirely on experience. Tradition almost by definition involves making a saint of an ancestor in a way that contradicts experience and rigorous historical criticism. The way traditions create a saintly ancestor contradicts the facts. And that is fine because the purpose of a tradition is not to communicate historically factual information but to communicate using symbol about the meaning of our lives. In any case, tradition and experience also stand in tension because all real traditions claim that it would take multiple lifetimes to discover all the richness folded into a tradition. One’s “experience” is important but also totally inadequate to understanding a tradition. Just because someone catches food poisoning from a plate of spaghetti doesn’t mean the tradition has no value and should be discarded!

The authority vs. the content of a tradition

But here is an important nuance: our experience of a tradition may be very good. Our inner compass, our rationality, may guide us to follow tradition to the letter! God, reason, experience,

or scientists may guide us to make spaghetti in the traditional way. Sometimes we are led to follow tradition. So it may seem that there is no necessary tension between leadings and tradition. But this is not true. Between leading and tradition there is always a conflict of *motivation* and *authority*.

Whenever Spirit is present, the motivation to follow tradition for tradition's sake, out of respect for the authority of an ancestor, is broken. Following tradition for tradition's sake is only possible (and necessary) in the Spirit's relative absence, symbolically speaking.

Traditions that once demanded unconditional obedience can be altered or even laid down in the Presence of Spirit or through the workings of Reason. This is why, in the traditional Christian imagery of the end-times, direct communion with God breaks the power of tradition. Through a leading, we are no longer bound to unquestioning obedience to tradition but liberated from it through Love. In fact, traditions are *fulfilled* through this liberation: the truest wishes of our ancestors are finally met. Our (idealized, saintly) ancestors love us and no tradition can be fully understood without love. So leadings and tradition are antithetical on the level of motivation and authority but ultimately not in conflict.

This is why the Presence of Spirit is good. We Quakers do good when we resist the orthodoxy that existed in the time of the Early Quakers and the orthodoxy of our own day. But Quakers and the Enlightenment so often take the anti-traditional stance one step further, taking an abolitionist view of tradition: this is the view that tradition is only a burden, only a hindrance, only a distraction. This, to me, is the tenor of the George Fox quote cited at the beginning, for instance where he says, "I was to bring people off from all the world's religions, which are in vain; that they might know the pure religion."

In the presence of a leading, tradition sometimes can indeed be a hindrance. But whenever the Spirit is relatively absent, tradition is essential, at least some of the time. And who among us can say that we are present in the Spirit all the time?

Leading vs. tradition: A Tension

This is the tension at the heart of Liberal Friends (by Liberal, I'm referring to unprogrammed friends, due to the influence of 19th century liberalism on our branch of Quakerism): we are a tradition based on leadings. We are a tradition based on the non-necessity of tradition, indeed, the abolition of tradition. We are a tradition based on "experience." But this leads us to a fairly odd (and not necessarily healthy) relationship to our traditions: we half-hold, half-drop them.

Consider our relationship to George Fox. There can be no doubt that he is the quasi-saint of our tradition. Adored in our children's songs, his journals are read as the founding text of Quakerism. Yet on the other hand, we are rightly critical of all this mythologizing and wrongly uncomfortable with it. We rightly point out that many people, many of them women, were instrumental in founding Quakerism. We claim we have no saints and holy books, and that is partially true. We don't look to George Fox to determine every aspect of our lives—we are critical of many things he said and did, even if we are inspired by and proud of his life's example. But there is always a nugget of mythologizing, perhaps not in the heart of every attender or even every member. But as a community, in the stories we tell, that nugget of mythologizing is undeniable. And it's necessary too. We cannot be a tradition without some kind of mythologized saintly ancestor.

Half-traditions and their risks

Do we find a “healthy balance” between leadings and traditions? Early Quakers met for four hours; we only meet for one. Sounds to me like the spirit of healthy compromise. Simplicity is a core Quaker value. Perhaps we are keeping our tradition simple and oriented toward our core testimonies?

But there are dangers here with our way of doing things. For one, there is no guarantee that our half-breed traditions are satisfying and powerful the way a full tradition is. This can lead to problems retaining the next generation within a very stimulating outside culture. Consider the ways we mythologize, de-mythologize, then re-sanctify George Fox, for instance, in the way we speak to children or newcomers. It can be easy to get so busy contradicting ourselves, going back and forth, that we're not focusing on the deeper message of what George Fox *represents* for us, his mythical “true intention” for our lives. In a way, the historical facts are less important than what George Fox means to us today. But we can get so tangled by our semi-critical hagiography that we forget to communicate what matters about our tradition.

We also introduce quite a bit of inevitable intergenerational conflict into our meetings with these half-traditions. Consider the question of why we meet for the relatively arbitrary length of precisely one hour. For those who are moved by this half-breed tradition and others, the thought of changing them is unthinkable for two reasons: first, because a true tradition, even a half-tradition, retains some conservatism (i.e. the sense that tradition must remain unchanged). This leads to calls that we must continue to meet for one arbitrary hour simply because the last generation did, even if previous generations did not. Or that we must continue to lionize George Fox, no matter how historically inaccurate that is. Second—just like a bucket of water is much

more valuable on a desert island than near a fresh stream—because the half-tradition is already fragile, partially unfulfilling, at least somewhat arbitrary and tenuous, the thought of tampering with it can bring up powerful fears. This can lead to a virulent, fearful, and ultimately self-defeating cultural conservatism. This was much more common in previous generations of Quakers, but a concern worth bearing in mind.

To those moved by a half-tradition, any threat to the precious scrap of half-tradition, for instance through rational criticism, threatens to annihilate the meaningfulness of the community, which is already at least a bit fragile, by throwing everything up into the air. It is staggering the way an open mind to the leadings of Spirit can end in a hardened and fearful orthodoxy like the bad Quakers of old! This leads to a situation where half-traditions such as calling Sunday “First Day,” our odd semi-reverence for George Fox, or meeting for an hour are both half arbitrary (meaningless), and half traditional (and meaningful). This can easily lead to intergenerational conflict, where the old is viewed as clinging to meaningless convention and the new is seen as brash and dismissive. Rational criticism becomes genuinely disruptive and can understandably for that reason be discouraged.

Traditions today

Our society has so few genuine traditions that it is too easy to forget what a tradition is and what it is for. In our day, we certainly are still influenced by traditions: nation, family, marriage, funeral, race, and gender. But for most traditions, the conservatism, the requirement that they be unchanging, has been broken. Gender traditions, for instance, traditional gender roles, are still highly influential. But the hallmark of tradition—that as a wise, precious intention of a quasi-saintly ancestor, it must remain unchanged—is broken.

Within this situation of brokenness, Quakers participate in one of the boldest and truest acts of our age: waiting. We live in a cultural moment where the old traditions don’t speak to us as they did to our ancestors, but we await new traditions that can speak to us again. In the meantime, the Quaker way of “out with the old,” awaiting the New is bold and prophetic. The tension of our religion is the tension of our age. We ritualize this tension more directly than any other religion and that’s amazing. Even our half-traditions act out the drama of our time.

The wider, mainstream culture, too, is marked by half-traditions (in sociology these are known as “conventions,” one of the cultural hallmarks of modernity). The “nugget” of gender or family tradition is still there, but the conservative command is broken by rational criticism and

technology. We have many “conventions” and customs and much conventional thinking but few traditions.

Partially this is because Enlightenment thinkers, like Quakers, also implied that the authority of tradition was broken, in this case, through the universal application of Reason.

A few centuries ago, Quakers held a deeply radical and countercultural theology that, in modern times, has become fairly unremarkable and often indistinguishable. For us today this notion of tradition being broken isn't very new—we are used to living in a dominant society which views traditions as an obstacle to be overcome, at least in public life. Many traditions have already been severely weakened or annihilated, especially those of the oppressed such as indigenous cultures.

Steeped in Christian heritage, Enlightenment thought (the basis for secular society around us today) implicitly claimed that we are living in the Christian end-times, in a similar way to Quakers. Although it used no explicitly Christian language, Enlightenment thought implicitly promises the end-times in one of two ways: either we are one Liberation-from-tradition away from a harmonious end-times (e.g. anarchism) or that from now on history will see Progress, even if this Progress may be slow, or marked by fits and starts and regressions. Because of its claim that the (Christian) end of history was at hand, Enlightenment thought views religion, symbols, myth, and tradition as superfluous under the power of Reason.

In our society today, under the influence of Enlightenment thought, we are sometimes only dimly aware of the traditions that continue to guide our lives; we are used to a cavalier and dismissive attitude toward tradition. It is hard for us to remember how shocking and radical Quakerism and other millennial sects were. We have been so surrounded by this end-times theology, calling tradition unnecessary, for the past few centuries that we scarcely remember what traditions are for and why they matter, beyond the intergenerational communication of purely practical information. Traditions are a source of meaning and comfort—two things we humans seem to need to thrive. And all this has very significant consequences.

Quakerism and Colonialism

Significantly, Quakerism began with what can only be described as a fairly aggressive stance toward other Christian traditions (e.g. George Fox routinely interrupting church services) not to mention a Puritanical stance toward the traditions in the arts, e.g. folk dance.

Moreover, it is almost certainly not a coincidence that around the time Quakers were jettisoning what they viewed as the most Catholic elements of Christianity, the English project of colonizing not just Ireland, but also Scotland, North America, the East Indies, and even trading outposts in Africa was well underway. Crucial to the entire English colonial project was a relatively negative valuation of tradition, particularly the traditions of African and North American peoples, but Irish, Welsh, and Scottish traditions too, and even many rural English traditions. These traditions of the colonized also needed to be jettisoned. This new negative valuation of tradition was certainly accompanied by a new positive valuation of the infinite worth of every individual, as we can see in Quakerism. Nor was a negative view of Catholic and non-Christian traditions at all new. But still, this end-times theology as exemplified in the Quakers and others at the time (and later, in the Enlightenment)—with its dismissive attitude toward symbolism, myth, ritual, and tradition generally—was overall very friendly to the colonial project. It was compatible with the disruption of traditional land and beliefs, missionary work, and even later assimilatory projects such as the residential schools for North America's indigenous peoples or the assimilation of African slaves.

Even as it valued the Measure of Light (or the capacity for Reason) within each individual, this broader anti-traditional ideology—of which Quakers were only one part—was ideologically prepared to disrupt traditional ways of life in order to bring about the end-time (and English dominance). In Quakerism and the Enlightenment, there is quite a bit of optimism—sometimes founded, sometimes unfounded—that jettisoning tradition toward a radical inwardness will have harmonious, Rational results, rather than disorientation and cultural impoverishment. For the world's indigenous peoples, there was obviously much more of the latter, leading to cultural disruption and addiction.

We are rightly proud of the way William Penn interacted with the aboriginal peoples. But we are wrong to be so ignorant about the way our beautiful theology played a role in taking native people's land worldwide.

In any case, the end-times are not here, as Early Quakers claimed they were. The end-times certainly are partially within us—as the end-times are partially implicit in all of creation, in every moment, and in every human culture—but not unambiguously so, and not in such a way that any human group can entirely break the power and necessity of tradition. Indeed, Quakerism, despite being founded on the hope of ending tradition, has become a great tradition alongside other great traditions.

We are Wrong About Ourselves

Being based on abolishing tradition, as Quakers we face with the danger of naïveté and silence about our actual traditions. In other words, one of the primary dangers of Quaker thought today is that we are simply wrong about ourselves: we have traditions. When we claim to be following leadings, we are usually following traditions of one sort or another. We fool ourselves but fool no one else; our understanding of our faith can therefore be very superficial; we are unable to engage much in the dialog of world religions because we know ourselves so poorly. We eschew theology and we know our own traditions badly; we discard them too hastily; we sometimes end up with a poverty in our traditions (the flip side of simplicity), relatively little diversity within our “denomination,” too little glue to bind our communities.

Because of our aversion to theology we also are limited in our ability to come to meaningful conclusions about why so few Quaker children become Quakers, or why we are so predominantly white and middle class. For instance, some have pointed out that white, middle-class people tend to have the most passion for modern, Enlightenment ideals such as equality, liberation, or the utopia of a technologically perfected world. The working class, for instance, tend to have much less enthusiasm for these ideals. But if it is true that certain sociological forces make white, middle-class people most passionate about the ideals of the the Enlightenment, would those same forces mean white, middle-class people are also the most likely to become Quaker? Perhaps not but with our current indifference toward our theology, we are powerless to answer precisely this kind of structural question. Perhaps those who have been harmed the most through the decline in tradition’s power—the working class, indigenous people, and people of colour—will be the most allergic to Liberal Quaker ideas. Perhaps, as I’m suggesting, because they’re on some level more aware than we are that Quaker ideas were both cause and result of an ideology that destroyed (and continue to destroy) their lives.

Such questions may seem abstract but they have real consequences. For instance, the next question is if there are structural, sociological forces that cause people of colour and working class people to be less likely to become Quaker, and if so, are there reasonable and even minor things we can do to be more welcoming to them? I don’t know, but I do know it’s a good question. Essentially, it’s a question of whether our Quaker habits have white supremacy and classism built into them in ways that, despite (or possibly because of) our commitment to equality and seeing the Divine Spark in every person, we aren’t even close to realizing or correcting. But we need to know our theology to begin to answer these questions.

Considering that Liberal Quaker ideals resemble the ideals behind our modern way of life (e.g. equality, progress, liberation, education, introspection—more below), we have three principal dangers:

Easily Infected

Our way of life may be easily infected by other modern ideas, sometimes in subtle and potentially destructive ways. For instance, a wave of dissociation from communal institutions (e.g. churches, bowling leagues, scouts) has hit community groups hard since the 1960s, as discussed by Harvard sociologist Robert D. Putnam in *Bowling Alone*. The same forces that tear apart other institutions have struck Quaker institutions as well, reducing our capacity. Being relatively unarmed theologically, we are unable to articulate a particularly Quaker analysis or defense in the face of this. We have been just as at the mercy of those forces as most secular institutions. This is not all bad: as popular understandings of equality change, such as an understanding of institutional racism, our own testimony of equality will change as well. Our traditions can easily change with the times in negative and positive ways.

Quakerism's "Added-value" Unclear

We risk having relatively little “added value” to secular thought. Quaker thought was certainly quite revolutionary before the Enlightenment—but after? Why go through all the trouble of keeping the lights on if we add little substance to secular ideals? Even if we add a bit more emphasis on love, personal clarity, and techniques of conflict resolution—is that all? Really? If, as outlined throughout this course, we have lost the spiritual roots of our traditions (e.g. the spiritual roots of leadings or the symbolism behind the testimony of equality) then do we have a significant amount to add within secular society? Enlightenment ideals of liberal humanism and democracy already promote ideals of equality, efficiency, minimalism, introspection, personal freedom and expression, solidarity and care for the environment, the importance of love, a wish for a peaceful society, conflict resolution techniques, and a sense of the infinite worth of each individual (because of their Rational capacity). Even our amazing doctrine of leadings has a Protestant-secular equivalent: a calling. Many non-Quakers, atheists and others, articulate very similar values as ours. We would risk being arrogant and wrong to deny that. We are not the only pacifists. We are rightly proud to have courageously articulated such values and often before others, but that does not mean we are adding much that is uniquely Quaker to the conversation today.

In many ways, that is ok. There is good in repeating a good ideal but it's worth noting that these days we are more duplicating than adding. For instance, many secular people think and talk

about equality in nearly the same way that we do as Quakers. Mostly, this is ok but we risk a lack of passion about maintaining Quaker organizations. Might children sense that there is not much need to come to meeting if we add little to their lives, at least intellectually speaking? The danger here is that our traditions might seem to contribute too little.

But I think this course contends that if we recover a symbolic understanding of leadings (or the peace testimony, or equality for instance) by rooting it theologically and historically then I am absolutely convinced that we gain something unique and valuable to add to the secular conversation—a conversation which is painfully literal and completely unrooted theologically speaking.

Liberal Quakers Articulate the Logic of Power

We Quakers are certainly able to critique the world around us according to Quaker ideals. There is much in our world that is horrifying when viewed through the lens of these ideals. The same goes for modern liberal-democratic ideals, for that matter—ideals which we largely replicate these days. As Quakers we can critique the conditions of modern society when we invoke equality or peace or leadings. But as Quakers we are nearly powerless to critique modern ideals themselves (again, e.g. equality, introspection, authenticity, liberation, etc.). I personally find modern ideals problematic but in any case, suffice it to say that if there indeed are any injustices inherent in modern ideals, Quakers would perpetuate those injustices. These dangers are particularly dangerous whenever our theological knowledge is pitiful, which in my experience among us, it is.

In fact, of all the world religions, as Liberal Quakers our theology is closest to the logic of global power and capitalism. This might seem an astonishing statement at first. If anything, it seems that Liberal Quakers are more involved, not less, in effecting political, social, and economic change in the name of our ideals. But consider the analogy of the Roman Catholic church in feudal times. As Quakers, in many ways our theological situation—though not our political and financial situation—is similar to the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Europe.

The feudal Catholic Church certainly criticized the aristocracy often (and hypocritically) for their lack of generosity toward the peasantry. The feudal Catholic Church certainly did much—perhaps more than anyone else—to work against the worst abuses of feudalism, for instance through alms or by countering devastating war by promoting Christian unity and peace. But the feudal Catholic Church was nearly unable to critique feudal ideals (e.g. generosity, love, loyalty, and courage) since Catholic theology was the theology of power. Little critique was possible since the Catholic Church was so tightly bound with the ideology and theology of feudal

power. In spite of some disagreement, ultimately the Catholic Church “sacralized” the king’s rule.

The situation is similar today for Quakers. Many of us certainly work hard in the name of these ideals. But as theologically unarmed Quakers we can offer little meaningful critique of modern ideals themselves, even if we may believe a revolution is necessary to make these ideals possible. As Liberal Quakers we hold very similar ideals to the ideals that modern society is based on. Thus, similar to the Catholic Church in feudal times, our Quaker ideals and theology is strikingly similar to the theology of global power: liberal democracy. We can endlessly critique the conditions of modern society in the name of these ideals, and for good reason, but we are unable to critique modern ideals themselves because those ideals are so close to our own. I am suggesting that it is dangerous for the theologically unarmed to be so close to the logic of power.

Like the Catholic Church, we risk unwittingly “sacralizing” the ideals of our day. We may critique the behaviour of the powerful but we risk sacralizing the ideals that brought them to power and keep them there. We also risk turning the oppressed against us, entirely unwittingly. We may be sacralizing attitudes that continue to assimilate people of colour and indigenous peoples, for instance. As Quakers we are proud to have affirmed the dignity and worth of all peoples from the beginning. But, as mentioned above, our millennial attitude, viewing tradition as unnecessary, has also had the impact of reinforcing colonialism, which depends on a de-valuation of tradition to justify the displacement and destruction of native peoples worldwide. Leadings cannot be so easily disconnected from this theft.

And we are equally embedded in the assimilation and destruction of regional, rural, and working-class cultures. When these cultures reach a crisis point, out of that vulnerability come irrational conservative explosions such as the rise of Stephen Harper, George W. Bush, or Donald Trump (or Hitler or Mussolini). As theologically unarmed Quakers, ambivalent toward tradition, we have little chance of gaining much critical insight into the situation. We risk continuing or sacralizing the mistreatment that led to these movements in the first place.

Live by Leadings Alone?

These dangers, though great, are joined by another set of dangers: the self-annihilation of our Quaker traditions through an overconfident over-reliance on leadings. Whether we like to admit it or not, we do have Quaker traditions. If we attempt to base our entire religion off leadings alone—and to be fair, that is an irresistible temptation since for many this is the essence of Liberal Quakerism—then we risk impoverishing or destroying our tradition. Will Quakers

someday question our conventions such as “do we truly feel *led* by Spirit to meet for one hour?” (Those who do not make meeting regularly perhaps already question this.) Or maybe Quakers will ask, if everyone is faithful why do we need a Clerk?, why do we meet on Sundays? Why do we have all this jargon (e.g. First Day)? It may seem that “common sense” or discernment can turn us away from such radical questions, but it cannot. The only real way out is to affirm Quaker traditions as important, which would take great humility for us. It would require a radical re-understanding of the heart of the Quaker faith.

Because we do lack respect for our traditions, because we knowingly alter them, and because we are not as honest with ourselves as we could be about the reality and importance of Quaker traditions, we risk destroying the substance of our faith. I’m not talking about a total abandonment of our traditions. We can undermine ourselves very powerfully just by undermining our own traditions or by throwing everything into the air and questioning everything.

There is nothing wrong with invoking the symbol of the end-times, and orienting ourselves in expectant waiting. It is wonderful and valid to build a religion on that kind of prophetic awaiting, especially if this is understood as symbolism and if utopian thinking is avoided. Our Quaker meetings are so precious and bold: we enter into collective silence together with no plan and little stimulation, trusting that we will somehow be transformed. We enter into worship with attention to business together, even in times of conflict, without formal leaders and formal power. That takes guts.

But it is a fantasy to hope to live “by leadings alone”—it will never happen. And what if this ideal is actually destructive to our ability to detect, understand, and follow leadings? What if our attitude toward tradition is unhealthy in such a way that strains our relationship both to tradition and to Spirit?

We are familiar with the thought that living by *tradition* alone is unhealthy. This is the error of hardened orthodoxy. Fanatics only recognize the authority of ancestors. They deny our ability to reason and close themselves to Spirit. This is the deeply destructive and dehumanizing path of certain fundamentalists, and leads to a spiritless dogmatism. But what if attempting to live by leadings alone leads to problems as well?

Living by leadings alone is almost certainly a delusion. If people have leadings as often as I do, then they would live mostly in silent inaction. But more likely, a prideful self-deception enters play: half-blindly following tradition is falsely called a leading. Once self-deception and pride have entered the arena, it is not long until our relationship to Spirit is strained. Nor is radical

self-criticism really much of an option, for that would risk both exposing our pride and condemning us to mostly silent inaction. This is the recipe for a Quaker faith with many relatively arbitrary and meaningless semi-traditions (e.g. calling Sunday “First Day”), only semi-rooted in our history, only ever semi-critical of ourselves even in our most pessimistic moments.

Testing a Leading

Many Quakers have asked: how can I know if I’m having a leading? Different people apply different thresholds for when to speak in meeting. In other words, different people apply differing levels of doubt to test their leadings before acting on them. What is the appropriate amount of doubt to apply? Is that guy who always says something weird in meeting really speaking out of a leading? Is he not threshing his leadings enough or am I not being faithful to my leading to speak? This can lead to quite a bit of self-doubt. But here’s a radical possibility: what if none of these tests is rigorous enough?

Here’s a wild suggestion: how do you know when you’re having a leading? Easy, you’re not. That’s not how it works.

All this discussion of leadings is still too literal. In the same way that God is a symbol—not a being who is walking around, talking to us—what if leadings are not a literal event that can happen as such? Leadings are a symbol, a metaphor for our experience of culture. Perhaps a leading is a quality of culture, a quality of how we experience culture. A leading is a kind of relationship to a given tradition. Nor is it a quality that can exist in a yes/no way, but on a spectrum. There is no pure leading. More doubt can always be applied, more hesitation is always possible—every “leading” is some expression of self-interest or of tradition, too. I would suggest that leadings don’t happen in isolation: what can happen is, symbolically speaking, through an act of God, we can be moved to ecstasy through a tradition. Through a leading, that tradition is fulfilled.

To say that leadings can somehow happen without any reference to tradition risks hubris and can lead to colonialism. For instance, what if I claim that God is communicating with me directly and calling me to sit in silent expectation, perhaps speaking here and there, and I claim that this leading is entirely independent of any tradition? Well, that is probably self-deception but in any case, it would not be much of a leap to become quite arrogant and claim that others are too attached to their traditions and that God is commanding all of us to live like Quakers. But in reality, the entirety of Quaker practice comes out of a English and Christian tradition. These are

not universally valid traditions any more than any other tradition but very much rooted in 17th century English culture and the historical events afterwards.

This all might seem like a silly example except that precisely this kind of mentality has had deadly consequences all over the world. After all, the colonial British often did the same thing: viewing their own behaviour as “Rational” (not recognizing the influence of British tradition on their definition of rational), they very quickly became quite arrogant and wiped out thousands of indigenous cultures worldwide, which they called “irrational.” Little did they suspect, by irrational they actually just meant “not English.” This kind of attitude (calling one’s own traditions The Truth) is the very definition of white supremacy, as far as I’m concerned. As Quakers, we should be the first (not the last) to avoid this kind of catastrophic hubris. We must affirm the importance of traditions in informing our leadings. But we must also admit that the deck is stacked against us: that kind of humility was not at all the practice of early Quakers.

But a leading within tradition rarely if ever happens in a perfect way: usually some doubt and imperfection remains. So it takes humility and an element of judgment to choose to work with imperfect leadings, for that is all most of us will ever receive nearly all of the time.

What I hope is that this more nuanced understanding of leadings can give more courage to the wise who rarely speak in meeting and more humility to the foolish who speak too often.

Finding the right relationship between leading and tradition

What can a healthy balance of leading and tradition possibly look like? This is more difficult to attain than it might seem, and Quakers are farther from a healthy balance than most religions. If we affirm tradition too strongly, we risk killing the prophetic and critical spirit that is Quakerism’s greatest asset and strength. But in affirming leadings too strongly we risk deceiving ourselves about the dependence of leadings on our traditions, and we risk impoverishing our faith and straining our relationship to Spirit.

It may seem that the best answer lies on some middle ground is the answer, a compromise of tradition and leading, but this fails spectacularly. Recall that one of the primary traits of a genuine tradition is that it must remain unchanged. A tradition whose elements are moved around or removed is no longer a tradition. Imagine an American flag with the stars removed and purple stripes—it’s nonsense. Traditions have symbolic importance. Like the American flag, elements of symbolism cannot be arbitrarily moved around or else the symbolism is annihilated.

Similarly, a tradition loses its deeper meaning if only half is conserved. Although a tempting answer, we simply cannot simply pick and choose and believe we are affirming tradition.

But leadings too cannot be compromised in this way—we cannot act half out of tradition and half out of a leading. If the Spirit leads us in a particular direction, then we must follow it radically. Anything less is a feel-good religion and self-deception. It's too easy to call our whims leadings at our convenience. Traditions exist to challenge us to go deeper.

This path of compromise will be dissatisfactory to anyone who thinks radically because radical tradition and radical leading are both tacitly undermined. Also, remember, because many forget this, that it sounds good in theory to say that we are proud of our traditions but not in practice. That's because what's traditional in our society is Catholic, patriarchal, cis-hetero-sexist, white supremacy within a domineering family. It is cheap to agree to "affirm tradition" until we realize how many billions have been hurt or killed by these traditions. Quaker traditions are part of an ugly history of colonialism—to affirm our tradition is to affirm our short-comings and our responsibilities. There is no feel-good solution here. Any settler in our day who talks in rosy terms about being proud of their tradition is taking a short-cut somewhere. There is no way to affirm tradition while floating along and doing whatever's easiest or most convenient most of the time. Affirming tradition is a path of determined hard work. Both people and the tradition are often in need of generations upon generations of healing.

Finding a proper relationship between leading and tradition is a tremendous challenge and requires a tremendous commitment. Traditions come with blessings but also with baggage that we need to unpack and properly put away.

But this challenge is actually a tremendous opportunity: to recommit to our community and to promote justice, for grappling with how to live our tradition today *is* the task before all oppressed people in modern times.

All oppressed people face the same three rotten alternatives we do: backward-looking orthodoxy (only tradition), cosmopolitan loss of tradition (only leadings, self-deception, and eventually assimilation), or a compromise of tradition and Spirit that ultimately satisfies very few of us. For the human spirit is a spirit of radical questions and radical boldness. As mentioned earlier, in communities marked by compromise of leading and tradition, we see that anyone who thinks radically is dissatisfied, sensing that the community is either too stuck in its ways or too dismissive of tradition (or both). This is our chance to strengthen our community across generations.

At the very least, if we Quakers begin to tackle this question of reviving our traditions, we can finally end our ugly complicity with assimilation. We can finally decide to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the oppressed and resolve to work so that all the world's traditions can be affirmed, revived, and thrive. But that's no short-cut because some of our traditions are ugly indeed. Currently, for instance, indigenous people must affirm their traditions within our "Enlightened" society that views tradition as passé generally on the one hand, and on the other hand, in an impressive act of self-deception, has and still does unconsciously view English settler traditions as rationally self-evident and liberated. Quakers are of too little help here because we call for a radical inward turn, which is too anti-cultural and anti-traditional to be of service to the oppressed fighting to preserve their cultures and traditions. Indigenous peoples must revitalize their traditions in a time when their children are often more interested in a flashy and aggressive consumer society, the constant temptation of assimilation.

No one can ever return to the way things were in the 1200s—not indigenous people, not us. Modernity cannot be undone, partially because the technical innovation and personal liberation has done so much good. We can only move forward.

But asking these questions is an opportunity for compassion, community, and service, particularly for the world's most vulnerable who often face both material and cultural poverty. In reevaluating our tradition and our understanding of leadings, we can own and help heal our colonial legacy, being more honest with ourselves. It is also an opportunity to know ourselves more deeply and to appreciate the richness and diversity of our tradition.

One solution

I personally believe that one excellent solution to the problem of leadings and tradition is humour. Humour is one of the few ways that we can keep our traditions entirely intact, including the element of unquestioning obedience that traditions require, without actually, literally binding ourselves to them, closing ourselves to spirit. This is why this course includes jokes. I'm talking about a particular kind of play-dumb, excuse-laden, wink-filled humour that says:

"We Quakers have a testimony against that forbids us from killing—unless you mean slowly killing each other with cookies every week."

"All Quakers eat oatmeal for breakfast."

"No true Quaker meeting is shorter than four hours long—we just take a little tea-break after an hour. Wouldn't want anyone to die of dehydration—we'll get right back to worship next week (unless we have plans that day). Besides, we can worship and chew at the same time."

"All hail our benevolent dictator for life (the clerk)."

“All my Readings accord perfectly with the Bible. Or at least I assume so, I’ve never actually read it.”

It is a particular flavour of humour that is rich in tradition as well as liberal in substance. This is only one potential solution—do you see others?

Session 5: Conclusion: Toward a Symbol of Leadings pp. 44

Homework in advance of session 5:

The homework for this session focuses on the relationship between leadings on the one hand and culture and tradition on the other. This is the question of whether leadings are aligned with tradition or somehow beyond or contrary to tradition. Keep in mind that real cultures are far from monolithic—they have competing tendencies and even contradictions. So the homework this week is to observe two leadings—either from this week or anytime in the past—and name a way that those leadings contradict a tradition and a way the leading aligns with a tradition. One leading may do both.

Commentary: Summing up

Throughout this course, we have been discussing a danger: the danger of having a literal understanding of our own religion and symbols, in this case, leadings. This is all too easy to do within our technical society, which sees no need for symbolism, at least in principle. We Quakers are perhaps particularly vulnerable considering we have no specialized priesthood whose job is to conserve and systematically express these symbols. It falls on us to defend them, in many ways going counter to our larger society. In this, our situation is akin to many religions and not just Judeo-Christian religions. For instance, aboriginal cultures have the same struggle to conserve and systematically express the symbols of their culture, while also defending against literalized understandings of them.

We have discussed a few of the principal ways that the symbol of a leading has been literalized throughout Quaker history: for Early Quakers, the end-time was literally at hand, meaning that the Spirit's guidance was assumed to be ever-present, particularly if we were good Puritans and gave up ritual, religious and secular art, dancing, and other worldly distractions. But this illusion didn't last long: drunkenness and other vices that shocked the Puritans were among Quakers just as human frailty exists among every human group.

Then when the end-time didn't arrive, there were two options: either leadings faded in importance or leadings became a kind of "decentralized ethics." The first option, where leadings fade into the background, was very common: for instance, in the 18th century, Quakers set about creating moral laws to determine who was allowed to be part of Quaker meetings. Many

were disowned and banished from the meeting. The legalistic theology behind this assumed *a priori* that it is impossible to have a leading to drink alcohol or wield a weapon. For these Quakers, leadings are true leadings when they match a pre-existing ethical code. Our leadings are false leadings when they do not match a pre-existing ethical code. But then leadings become superfluous. There is no need or reason to turn inwards or turn to God if we can find correct behaviour in an external ethical code of “Testimonies.” This is why leadings fade in importance. Nor is it easy in this situation for a truly prophetic spirit to critique this ethical code, since *a priori* any critique is wrong.

The other option is a “decentralized” ethics in the sense that leadings became *the* source of ethical behaviour. Rather than a legalistic ethics, with murder always being wrong and giving money to the poor always being right, no matter how we feel inside, Quaker ethics became “decentralized,” grounded in the experience of leadings. Following a leading, as discerned individually and corporately, becomes good, and not following a leading becomes bad. Leadings become the only law. But this requires us to develop some method of figuring out what is a “true” or “false” leading, corporately and individually (e.g. hesitation, certain “symptoms,” the experience of love).

With the development of psychology and the concept of the unconscious, we gained a temptation to try to identify leadings with particular thoughts or feelings or bodily experiences, for instance the image of being pulled out of one’s chair, a quickening of the pulse, a thought repeating itself. In some ways, this continued the literalizing trend of turning a religious symbol into an objective phenomenon. Although many have pointed out that it is idolatrous to identify a leading with any individual one of these signs or any of them, that temptation is an ever-present danger.

We have seen that throughout Quaker history many believed that the power of leadings meant we do not need tradition. This literalized understanding, implying that the end-times are here, has meant that Quakers have jettisoned many traditions. We also enter into an ambivalent relationship with our traditions. Throughout Quaker history, attempts have been made balance leadings with tradition. Often, we have fallen too far to one side, either through a hardened orthodoxy or through a lack of rootedness in our traditions.

Either way, leadings throughout Quakerism have been understood as a command from God to take a literal action or follow a literal ethical code. Faced with this command, we have the freedom to say yes or no. We can freely choose. But much emphasis has been placed on behaviour—whether or not we enact this leading in a literal way. Let us see what we can do to develop another lens for understanding leadings.

Readings

A true leading *increases* the Love in your own life and in the lives of those you are affecting by your leading! Or, in other words, it helps you to see more of God's Presence around you, to be able to Love others more, to be more vulnerable, more open.

Which brings me to the last point I have learned experimentally. If the leading seems to be based in fear, it could not be True, as True Love casteth out Fear. God has nothing to do with Fear. With God all things are possible. If the leading limits your life or the lives of those around you out of fear of possible consequences, it is not from God. This realization is helping me so much, especially as a parent, but also as I face uncertainty in my own future. Are my actions prompted by a fear of what might happen if I don't ...? That is not the way Christ leads us.

—Barb, Plainly Quaker blog

Advices and queries, CYM Faith & Practice

1. Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.

Faith & Practice from Britain Yearly Meeting

[9.19](#)

Therefore, dear Friends, wait in the Light, that the Word of the Lord may dwell plentifully in you.

William Dewsbury, 1678

Whoever would be able, in the life, to do all things, let him sink into that in himself which is not, that it may bring to nought all things in him that are; that so it alone may be: and he by it being brought to nothing, will easily become all in it. This is the true way of restoration, of redemption; first to be lost, to be overcome, to be drowned, to be made nothing by that *which is not*; that that may come to BE in him, and he be quickened, raised up, and perfected in that, and so become possessor of the fulness.

Isaac Pennington, 1616-1679

(Some found this reading baffling, so hint one from course participants about this reading: perhaps Penington is talking about *hubris*? Hint two, from the course developer: remember, these are Puritans, who are advocating a radical inward turn.)

Closing thought:

What if leadings are opportunities to realign ourselves with love? Whether or not we enact the leading fades in importance, although the importance of action does not disappear. First and foremost is the importance of our heart: love, healing, and our relationship to the divine. This is the “macro,” the big picture. Every leading becomes an image, a symbol of love for us. This part of leadings becomes primary and necessary. Of secondary and accidental importance is the action we take following a leading. Action is the “micro”, the details. Being “commanded” to take this action has helped realign our hearts with love, but then the action may or may not be important. This is an understanding of leadings that is primarily symbolic, rather than literal. But it is also not “otherworldly” because it does not remove the importance of action.

Perhaps if you’re anything like me, if you really pay attention, you receive a lot of urges, urges that sound a lot to me like leadings. These urges command me to move in many different directions at once in a way that would be impossible. Faced with these urges, I wish I could do so much more with my life but I am bound by my limitations in time and space. Discernment has its place, allowing me to realize that not all urges return with equal force. Of the urges I receive, I can discern which are feasible within the time and energy I have.

But despite the discernment we do, a lot of Quakers are overworked and overtaxed. Is our literal understanding of leadings part of why? Perhaps for some of us, the feeling of being overwhelmed by sundry and contradictory urges (many of them leadings, I suspect) distances us from Spirit, rather than bringing us closer. It’s like a supervisor who calls every five minutes to assign another task in addition to the ones we are already working on. At some point, we stop answering the phone. In the same way, is our literal understanding of leadings preventing us from “picking up the phone” when Spirit calls us?

I wonder if it might help to view leadings as first of all a call to love—in fact, a symbol of love—and secondarily about action. This way, we can accept every single leading as helping us align our hearts and minds with love. But then we can discern which leadings are calls to action. My experience is that understanding leadings only in the narrow sense (a literal call to action) leads to a strained relationship with Spirit.

What if, through leadings, we receive images and ideas about what love *would* do, but not necessarily about what we *should* do; what if many leadings are only symbols of love? Leading in the literal sense of an action we are called to take is narrow compared to the symbol of leading, which is a broader understanding. A leading understood as a symbol means that some ideas and images that bombard our brains are symbols for what love lives like. Instead of “resisting” them, or discerning which ones to enact, what if we embrace them *all* as leadings in a broader, symbolic sense? A leading in the broader sense is a reverie, an imagining of God made real through the imaginary actions we are commanded to do. And in that moment of reverie, when we are fortunate enough to accept that gift of imagery, a perfection takes hold of our heart, if perhaps not our actions.

Put another way, what if there are leadings of the mind and the heart? The suggestion here is that leadings are not just about our externally measurable actions, but also sometimes about our emotions and our thinking. I am suggesting that Spirit leads us to think and feel certain things, especially love. This notion, leadings of the mind and the heart, combines both the narrow and the broad sense of a leading into one general meaning of the word leading. It means we can have a leading in the narrow, literal sense (an action to which we are commanded) to enact a leading in the broad sense (first and foremost, a state of mind or attitude). There are times when Spirit commands us to love, using imagery of our potential actions in this world to lead us toward love. And my hope is that this understanding of leadings allows us to be more faithful.

I have a concern: that by viewing leadings only in the narrow, literal way (as first and foremost an external action, and secondarily about the heart and mind), that we are not listening to the call of Spirit; we are not hearing the call of love and peace in our hearts and minds.

When we view leadings as first and foremost a symbol, we know that the path of a meaningful life of restful purpose is always available to us. Yet this hardly denies that leadings that call us to literal, external action are for some of us a daily phenomenon as well. But viewing leadings as about the heart and mind perhaps also refines our understanding of leadings in the narrow sense. It leads to the following question: can there be a true leading to external action that leaves our hearts and minds feeling no love and courage, even if anxiety accompanies most true leadings? Perhaps with this criterion we can better discern our true leadings for action.

The symbol of leadings in the narrow sense is already a tremendous gift that Quakers give the world: the importance of simplicity and courage. But I wonder if leadings in the broad sense is

one of the great messages that Quakers have, lying dormant, to give a tired and overworked world: that each leading is a symbol, an opportunity to live love, at least in our hearts and minds.

A leading is the experience that life can be meaningful and is meaningful. A leading tells us that a particular action has meaning, and therefore that all of creation is infinitely important. Despite our tininess in the universe and all our limitations, both physical and moral, despite all the times we have resisted and rejected the life we are called to live, a new leading always springs forth, a miracle of forgiveness.

In this sense, a leading, even though it calls us to live something greater, is also the knowledge that we are loved as we are, in all our limitations. And certainly for most of us, it is only rarely perhaps that we can say that we fully lived a leading, in all the courage of heart and risk that entails.

Perhaps all of these thoughts can allow us to stop saying “Uh oh” when faced with yet another potential leading. Perhaps this allows us to welcome far more leadings into our lives as an opportunity to live love, equality, and peace, at least in our hearts. Perhaps then we can know that every leading is a burden we can bear.

But perhaps not! How does this resonate for you? What do you think? Does this open up a new dimension in the experience of leadings for you?

Session 6: Story-time and celebration pp. 51

The movement of spirit in our lives:

Homework in advance of session 6: I've been suggesting that in some cases leadings aren't a command to external action. Rather, the image of being commanded to action is, in some cases, a chance to align our hearts with love. In other cases, the action remains very important. What happens when we view leadings as about love first and action second? What do we like or dislike about this? How does it change our relationship with the Spirit to view leadings in this way?

Open discussion (60 minutes, 1h25 total)

Thoughts, reflections, stories, experiences, silliness welcome. This is a moment to celebrate the connections we've built through this course, any way that we've inspired each other, and to celebrate our national and local community of Quakers across Canada and the Light in everyone in the world.

The course has moved quickly and perhaps this has been occasionally frustrating. Inspiring topics arose yet we moved on. Now is the time to take the best of the best of these moments, and an opportunity to discuss them.

No readings or opening questions is assigned for this session. Reviewing readings is encouraged.

Big check-out (combine these questions):

The normal question: how was today's session? How are you feeling relative to when you checked in, are you leaving with any intentions?

Question 1) Invite participants to use this time to have them express how *other participants* have enriched their lives.

Question 2) Do you leave this course with any intentions? How might we keep this conversation going?

Question 3) What are the main things you're taking away from this course?

Note: this course material is available online to be used by meetings. They now know everything they need to know in order to do this or another course, financed by CYM's Education and Outreach committee. *You* can keep this conversation going at your meetings.